

**James Madison to Thomas Jefferson, June 19, 1786.  
Transcription: The Writings of James Madison,  
ed. Gaillard Hunt. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons,  
1900-1910.**

**TO THOMAS JEFFERSON. MAD. MSS.**

Orange June 19th. 1786

Dear Sir, —Since my last which was of the 18th. of May I have recd. your very agreeable favor of the 28th of Octobr. I began to fear it had miscarried. Your reflections on the idle poor of Europe,<sup>1</sup> form a valuable lesson to the Legislators of every

1 “ Fontainebleau Oct. 28. 1785.

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“as soon as I had got clear of the town I fell in with a poor woman walking at same rate with myself & going the same course. wishing to know the condition of the labouring poor I entered into conversation with her, which I began by enquiries for the path which would lead me into the mountain; & thence proceeded to enquiries into her vocation, condition & circumstance, she told me she was a daylabourer, at 8 sous or 4d. sterling the day: that she had two children to maintain, & to pay a rent of 30 livres for her home, (which would consume the hire of 75 days) that often she could get no employment, and of course was without bread. as we had walked together near a mile & she had so far served me as a guide, I gave her, on parting, 24 sous. she burst into tears of a gratitude which I could perceive was unfeigned, because she was unable to utter a word. she had probably never before received so great an aid. this little attendrissement, with the solitude of my walk led me into a train of reflections on that unequal division of property which occasions

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the numberless instances of wretchedness which I had observed in this country & is to be observed all over Europe. the property of this country is absolutely concentrated in a very few hands, having revenues of from half a million of guineas a year downwards. these employ the flower of the country as servants, some of them having as many as 200 domestics. not labouring. they employ also a great number of manufacturers, & tradesmen, & lastly the class of labouring husbandmen. but after all these comes the most numerous of all the classes, that is, the poor who cannot find work. I asked myself what could be the reason that so many should be permitted to beg who are willing to work, in a country where there is a very considerable proportion of uncultivated lands? these lands are kept idle mostly for the sake of game. it should seem then that it must be because of the enormous wealth of the proprietors which places them above attention to the increase of their revenues by permitting these lands to be laboured. I am conscious that an equal division of property is impracticable. but the consequences of this enormous inequality producing so much misery to the bulk of mankind, legislators cannot invent too many devices for sub-dividing property, only taking care to let their sub divisions go hand in hand with the natural affections of the human mind. the descent of property of every kind therefore to all the children, or to all the brothers & sisters, or other relations in equal degree is a politic measure, and a practicable one. another means of silently lessening the unequality of property is to exempt all from taxation below a certain point, & to tax the higher portions of property in geometrical progression as they rise. Whenever there is in any country, uncultivated lands and unemployed poor, it is clear that the laws of property have been so far extended as to violate natural right, the earth is given as a common stock to man to labour & live on. if, for the encouragement of industry we allow it to be appropriated, we must take care that other employment be permitted to those excluded from the appropriation. if we do not the fundamental right to labour the earth returns to the unemployed. it is too soon yet in our country to say that every man who cannot find employment but who can find uncultivated land, shall be at liberty to cultivate it, paying a moderate rent, but it is not too soon to provide by every possible means that as few

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as possible shall be without a little portion of land. the small land holders are the most precious part of a state.“—Jefferson to Madison, *Mad. MSS.*

Country, and particularly of a new one. I hope you will enable yourself before you return to America to compare with this description of people in France the condition of the indigent part of other communities in Europe where the like causes of wretchedness exist in a less degree. I have no doubt but that the misery of the lower classes will be found to abate wherever the Government assumes a freer aspect, & the laws favor a subdivision of property, yet I suspect that the difference will not fully account for the comparative comfort of the mass of people in the United States. Our limited population has probably as large a share in producing this effect as the political advantages which distinguish us. A certain degree of misery seems inseparable from a high degree of populousness. If the lands in Europe which are now dedicated to the amusement of the idle rich, were parcelled out among the idle poor, I readily conceive the happy revolution which would be experienced by a certain proportion of the latter. But still would there not remain a great proportion unrelieved? No problem in political œconomy has appeared to me more puzzling than that which relates to the most proper distribution of the inhabitants of a country fully peopled.<sup>1</sup> Let the lands be shared among them ever so wisely, & let them be supplied with labourers ever so plentifully; as there must be a great surplus of subsistence, there will also remain a great surplus of inhabitants, a greater by far than will be employed in cloathing both themselves & those who feed them, and in administering to both, every other necessary & even comfort of life. What is to be done with this surplus? Hitherto we have seen them distributed into manufactures of superfluities, idle proprietors of productive lands, domestics, soldiers, merchants, mariners, and a few other less numerous classes. All these classes notwithstanding have been found insufficient to absorb the redundant members of a populous society; and yet a reduction of most of those classes enters into the very reform which appears so necessary & desirable. From a more equal partition of property, must result a greater simplicity of manners, consequently a less consumption of manufactured superfluities, and a less proportion of idle proprietors & domestics. From a juster Government must result less need of soldiers either for defence agst.

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dangers from without, or disturbances from within. The number of merchants must be inconsiderable under any modification of Society; and that of mariners will depend more on geographical position, than on the plan of legislation. But I forget that I am writing a letter not a dissertation.

1 Malthus' first edition of his *Essay on the Principle of Population* was not published till 1798.

Things have undergone little change here since my last. The scarcity of money the low price of Tobo. & the high price of bread continue to be the topics of complaint. The last evil is likely to be much increased by a sudden vicissitude in the prospects of wheat. At the date of my last we were praying for rain. Shortly after we had a deluge of it. From the 19th. of May to the 4th. of June, we scarcely saw the sun, had almost incessant rains, and sometimes showers, or rather torrents that threatened to sweep away every thing. The planters pretty generally availed themselves of the Season for getting their Tobacco into the hills. But the farmers have nearly lost their crops of wheat. A great proportion of the heads in this part of the country are blasted, and in many parts it is said the fields will not be worth cutting. Our crops of apples also which in common with all other fruits seemed to be abundant appear to have suffered much from the wet. We are now again suffering from the opposite extreme. We have had no rain since the cessation of the long spell, that is since the 3d instant, and the earth is as dry and as hard as a brick.

In an answer from the attorney to a late letter, he says "that after great anxiety we have recd the plan of a capitol from Mr J. and with some difficulty the directors have assented to conform the bricks already laid to that model."

I have a little itch to gain a smattering in chymistry. Will you be kind eno' to pick up some good elementary treatise for me, with a good dictionary of moderate size, unless the chymical volume in the encyclopedie should be judged a competent provision. Morveau's Elements I observe are quoted with great respect by Buffon. I wish also to get his two

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Boxes, called Le necessaire chimique. They are described in the Bibliotheque physico-economique for 1784. p. 134. where the maker in Paris is also referred to. I project this last indulgence on the supposition that the whole apparatus, including the contents of the Bottles will not cost more than a couple of Louis.

I observe that in your analysis of the Revisal p. 251 of your notes, a Bill is mentioned for consigning our roads to undertakers instead of the present vicious plan of repairing them. No such provision is comprized in the Road bill reported & printed. If it be any where in existence, I wish you could put me on the means of getting a sight of it. I conceive such a reform to be essential & that the Legislature would adopt it, if presented in a well digested form.

I lately sent you some particulars relating to our mole.<sup>1</sup> For want of something better to fill the remainder of my paper, I will now add the result of my examination two days ago of another of our minor quadrupeds, I mean, a Weasel. It was a female & came to my hands dead. Its colour corresponded with the description given by D'Aubenton of the Belette & Roselet or Hermine

<sup>1</sup> in enumerating the distinctions between our mole & the comon one of Europe, I find I omitted the difference of colour. You know the colour of ours, which is pretty remote from black, tho' somewhat darkish. [Note in MS.]

in its summer dress, excepting only that the belly &c. which in the European animal was white, was in ours of a lightish yellow, save only the part under the lower jaws which was white for about  $\frac{1}{2}$  an inch back from the under lip. The little brown spots near the corners of the mouth mentioned by D'Aubenton were peninsular. The tail was of the color of the back &c. all but the end which was black. The ears were extremely thin, had a fold or duplication on the lower part of the conque about 2 lines deep, and at the margin all around were covered with a very fine short hair or fur of the colour nearly of the back. The rest of the ear was in a manner naked, and of a lightish color. The forefeet were tipped & spotted with white. The hind feet were also tipped with white, and one of them a

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little spotted. It had five toes on each foot, the fifth on each being very short and at some distance from the end of the foot. Its smell was a sort of rankish musk, but not so strong as to be very offensive. It had no visible teats. Its weight dimensions &c. compared with those of Buffon's Belette & Hermine were as follows.

Weasel Belette Hermine oz pwt. gns. oz oz pwt. Weight 2 17 13 2\* 7 10 Inch lines Inch lines Inch lines Length from muzzle to root of tail 7 9 6 6 9 6 of the Trunk of the Tail 3 6 1 3 3 10 Height before 1 11 1 5 2 8 behind 2 6 1 6 3 10 distance from muzzle to lower corner of the eye 5 5 7 from upper corner of eye to the ear  $4\frac{1}{2}$  5 7 from one corner to the other of the eye  $3\frac{1}{4}$   $3\frac{1}{2}$  length of the ear perpendicularly  $4\frac{1}{2}$  3 4 width of ear horizontally 4 distance between the ears at bottom  $10\frac{1}{2}$  9 1 Length of the neck 1  $1\frac{1}{2}$  11 1 4

\* The belette of this weight was but 6 in. 5 lines in length.

The weight & measure of the Weasel are English those of the Belette & Roselet—french.

Weasel Belette Hermine Inch lines Inch lines Inch lines circumference of neck 2 5 2 2 6 of body behind forelegs 2 10 2 3 3 4 before hindlegs 3 3 2 2 3 4 of head between eyes & ears 2 9 2 6 3 3 Length of foreleg from knee to heel  $10\frac{1}{2}$  9 1 2 from heel to the nails 9 7 1 1 of hindleg from knee to heel 1 4 11 1 10 Width of forefoot  $3\frac{1}{2}$  3  $3\frac{1}{2}$  of hindfoot  $3\frac{1}{2}$  Length of nails of forefoot 2 2 3 of hindfoot  $1\frac{1}{2}$  of hair on the body  $3\frac{1}{2}$  3 6 at end of tail  $6\frac{1}{2}$  short 1 3 distance between anus and vulva 3 Spleen, length of 1 3 11 width of in middle  $3\frac{1}{2}$  4 Kidneys, long  $7\frac{1}{2}$   $5\frac{1}{2}$  wide  $4\frac{1}{2}$  4 thick 3 3 Heart, long  $6\frac{1}{2}$  4 round 1  $4\frac{1}{2}$  1 3 Tongue, long from end to the filêt  $3\frac{1}{2}$   $2\frac{1}{2}$  wide  $2\frac{3}{4}$  2 number no. no. Teeth 34 34 34 Ribbs 14 14 14 Vertebrae of tail 14 14 or 15 19 Palate furrows of 6 6 6

The gall bladder was empty, the membrane of the Bladder very thin, and the two last furrows of the palate broken in the middle, in the Weasel as noted in the Belette, and the contrary not noted in the Hermine.

The spleen was of the same color on both sides in the Weasel. In the Hermine it was of a reddish brown as in the weasel, on one side, and of a very pale hue on the other. Nothing is said as to this circumstance in the description of the Belette.

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The right kidney in the Weasel was advanced a little only before the left, as in the Belette, and not its whole length as in the Hermine.

The attempt to examine whether the number of false ribs in the Weasel was 4 as in the Belette or 3 as in the Hermine, was frustrated.

On a review of the differential characters of the Belette and the Hermine, and a comparison of the weasel with both, it appears. 1. that the weasel stands between the two in point of size, but much less removed from the former than the latter, unless the individual here examined was much under the ordinary size. Its having no visible teats seems to be an indication that it was young. Another *probable* indication was the smallness of the hindmost teeth both in the upper & lower Jaws, those in the lower being not bigger than the head of a small pin; & those in the upper disproportionate to the contiguous tooth. 2. that it resembles the Hermine in the length of the trunk of the tail, and in the blackness of its end, — but the Belette in the number of vertebræ in the Trunk, and in the shortness of the hair at the end of the tail. 3. That it resembles the Hermine in the colour of its feet, and the Belette in that of the margin of the ears. 4. that it resembles the Belette & not the Hermine in the Relative position of the Kidneys. 5. that it differs from the Hermine in being an inhabitant of warm climates. Whether it

resembles the Belette in not being an inhabitant of cold climates remains for enquiry. 6. that it differs from both in never becoming white during the winter, if this change be well founded with regard to the Belette. Buffon asserts that there are instances of it, but it may be questioned whether they were not mere albinos of the species.

The figure of the head of the Weasel when reduced to the naked bone resembled rather that of the Belette than that of the Hermine in the skeletons represented in Buffon. In its entire state it resembled most the head in the cut of the Hermine given by Buffon. Indeed the entire cut of the Hermine was a much stronger likeness of the weasel, than the cut of the Belette.

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The result of the comparison seems to be that notwithstanding the blackness of the end of the tail & whiteness of the feet, which are regarded as characteristics of the Hermine contradistinguishing it from the belette, our weasel cannot be of the former species, and is nothing more than a variety of the latter. This conclusion is the stronger, as the manners of our weasel correspond more nearly with those of the Belette, than with those of the Hermine. And if it be a just conclusion, it may possibly make one exception to Buffon's position that no animal is common to the two continents that cannot bear the climate where they join; as it certainly contradicts his assertion that of the animals common to the two continents, those of the new are in every instance smaller than those of the old.—But he seems to have given up this point himself. Supplemt. tom. 8, p. 329. “L'imperfection de nature qu'el [M. P. l'auteur des recherches sur les Americains] reproche gratuitement a l'Amerique en general, ne doit porter que sur les animaux *de la partie meridionale* de ce continent, lesquels &c.”—

My next will probably be dated in Philada or rather in N. York to which I am called by some business of a private nature in which I am concerned jointly with Col. Monroe. In the meantime I remain Yrs. very affectionately